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AUTHOR	Aiex, Nola Kortner
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ABSTRACT

This Digest argues that a well designed course of instruction can utilize motion pictures, television, and video tapes to channel a student's enthusiasm and route it to an academically useful goal. Sections of the Digest discuss what films and television offer to educators; potential applications in language arts classrooms; some other applications (including science fiction and classroom guides); and how films and television can target and motivate writing. (RS)

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Indiana University
47408-2698
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150

D147

Bloomington, IN
(812) 855-5847
(800) 759-4723

Mass Media Use in the Classroom

by Nola Kortner Aiex

In its 75th anniversary issue (November-December 1995) the education journal "Clearing House" reprinted an article originally published in 1930. Entitled "Educating the Twentieth-Century Youth," the article argued that 20th-century youth should be taught using 20th-century methods and went on to discuss the use of the stereograph, the stereopticon slide, the radio, and the motion picture (Dorris, 1995). The first two media named are museum pieces today, while radio is the home of talk shows and disk jockeys, but the motion picture is still going strong, joined by television and videotapes. A well designed course of instruction can utilize these mass media to channel a student's enthusiasm and route it to an academically useful goal.

What do films and television offer to educators?

Film communication offers links between classrooms and society. Motion pictures can help explore cultural context, may be integrated easily into the curriculum, are entertaining, and allow flexibility of materials and teaching techniques. Motion pictures can also be related to students' personal experiences, act as a focus for teacher-student interaction, and can be used to promote awareness of the interrelationship between modes (picture, movement, language, sound, captions) (Wood, 1995). TV and video are also highly valuable as teaching tools, and seen as especially effective for reaching visual learners and special populations. According to a recent wide-ranging survey, TV and video are being used more deliberately than ever before and are being more fully integrated into the curricula. (Study of School Uses of Television and Video, 1997). Teachers look for quality programming, programs of appropriate structure and length, and advance information to allow them to preview and tape.

The survey found that students and teachers are becoming more media savvy and are increasingly using camcorders and other video production equipment. It also found that the focus on computer acquisition and use has not replaced television in the classroom. Or, as one educator has stated: "Because students live in a media-oriented world, they consider sight and sound as 'user-friendly'" (Post, 1987).

Nola Kortner Aiex is the former Assistant Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication.

What are the potential applications in Language Arts?

Even before the ease of using the VCR, the "introduction to film course" had become a staple in American colleges and universities (Lovell, 1987). What has become apparent over the years is that film can be used as an adjunct to almost any discipline, most especially the language arts. Lovell notes that in addition to encouraging the use and development of communication skills, film can be used to establish a social context for English as a second language and to provide visual "texts" for deaf students. Indeed, movies can be considered as a form of text. They are controllable teaching instruments, and offer a great variety of subject, communicative language, language environment, and cultural content (Wood, 1995).

Post (1987) contends that videotapes of literary classics can become powerful allies of the teacher in the English classroom if used effectively. She adds that films allow the teaching of longer works that might otherwise be omitted or the teaching of controversial works that might be excluded from the curriculum. The example she gives is of Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Although the film is definitely an adult film, the screenplay contains none of the potentially objectionable material or language that appears in the original play.

If videotapes of historical and literature-based films are going to be used as shortcuts to learning, then teachers should structure videotapes into the curriculum and classroom experience to teach students how to intelligently evaluate what they are watching and to compare the visual with the originally published work (Paquette, 1996). In teaching Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter," teachers should encourage students to read the book and watch the recent film and then write a research paper for which they: (1) read articles about the movie; (2) identify places in the film and book that contradict each other (for example, the film has a contrived "happy ending," a plot change which astounded and bothered American literature teachers); (3) write a compare and contrast paper that will explain the significance of these differences and how they change the meaning of the original work; (4) conduct research to explain why the director/script writers made these changes; (5) conduct research to determine whether the book and the film accurately portray the historical period; and (6) analyze how the alteration of history or literature by the film affects the public view. Another way to examine the artistic choices made by actors, writers, and directors would be to use short clips from different film versions of classic literature–Laurence Olivier's "Hamlet" and Kenneth Branagh's "Hamlet," for example (Kaufmann and Kent, 1998).

What are some other applications?

Science fiction has long been the favored recreational reading genre for adolescent boys. Librarians and teachers could use a wide range of science fiction materials as teaching tools. From Mark Twain and H.G. Wells to Anne McCaffrey and Isaac Asimov, novels and short stories can provide the grist for discussion in such subjects as psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, and science (Ontell, 1997). There are many movie and television versions of science fiction tales which can be used for reading motivation and for stimulating the imagination. Science fiction films can especially engage students and encourage greater enthusiasm and interest in science. Even a "fun" movie such as "Jurassic Park" can be used as a vehicle for science comprehension (Cavanaugh and Cavanaugh, 1996). In addition, television networks such as PBS and CNN provide classroom guides for educational materials–PBS for their many documentaries and CNN to accompany their daily broadcasts. A look at CNN's Guide for October 1998 shows the following topics related to science: scientists find trace fossil; the evidence of billion-year-old worms; John Glenn's return to space sparks a renewed interest in Space Camp, and a NASA invention helps one young woman win her battle with cancer (CNN Newsroom Classroom Guides, October 1998). These segments could be viewed in the classroom to spark discussion among students.

How can films and television target and motivate writing?

Jeremiah (1987) outlines an instructional model for using television news and documentaries for writing instruction in the secondary and postsecondary classroom. He believes that the structure and content of news presentations mirror the practice of essay writing, and thus can serve as a writing project that effectively serves instruction. A step-by-step examination of a selected TV program can be undertaken in a single class period, using the following strategies: (1) as a warm-up mechanism, the teacher introduces the writing skill (for example, to inform or to persuade); (2) students are allowed time for questions and comments; (3) the news segment or documentary is shown; (4) students produce an outline for the news report they will write in response to the stimulus; and (5) the outlines are assessed for organization. The outlines are collected at the end of the class period to minimize any external influences, and the students produce a full-length essay during the next class period, after their outlines have been returned.

Another approach from Boyd and Robitaille (1987) suggests using the popular mass media to generate topics for a composition workshop designed for the college writer but adaptable for secondary-level writers. This approach concentrates on advertising images but also uses movies, monthly magazines, and television series to help foster critical thinking while writing. The workshop is built around a sequence of analogies between what the students already know experientially as film and television viewers and what they need to know as essay writers.

Moss (1987) uses the lowly, elemental daytime soap opera as a vehicle for teaching remedial writing in the SEEK program in New York City colleges. Utilizing a VCR and videotape so that everyone can watch the episode at the same time (and filling in gaps in plot lines by reading "Soap Opera Digest"), Moss begins by asking the students to write on the most elementary level. The assignment is intended to tap into their passionate devotion to "the soaps"–which characters do they like the best, the least, and why? Then the class members discuss the acting and begin to impose critical criteria on the material. A short lesson on genres establishes appropriate aesthetic categories, and the students can begin to dissect the narrative in a composition.

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